



Review of Regional Planning Guidelines for the Border Region (2010-2022)

Submission from the
Western Development Commission
April 2009

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Submission from Western Development Commission (WDC) to the Review of the Regional Planning Guidelines for the Border Region (2010-2022)

1. Introduction

The Western Development Commission (WDC) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the review of the Regional Planning Guidelines (RPGs) for the Border Region (2010-2022).

The WDC is a statutory body whose primary purpose is to promote economic and social development in the **Western Region** comprising Galway, Mayo, Roscommon and Clare, along with the Border counties of Sligo, Leitrim and Donegal. The WDC operates under the aegis of DCRAGA¹ and its main aim is to ensure the region maximises its full potential for economic and social development. This is done by:

- identifying and analysing the key social and economic issues for the region and making policy recommendations;
- supporting the sustainable development of the rural economy through strategic projects;
- promoting the benefits of living, working and doing business in the region through the LookWest.ie campaign; and
- providing risk capital to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) through the WDC Investment Fund.

Given the WDC's role in regional development, the National Spatial Strategy (NSS) provides a framework for many of its activities, in particular the promotion of balanced regional development. The WDC made a submission to the original formulation of the NSS and has also recently made an input to the current refresh and update of the NSS. As the overall aim of the RPGs is to ensure the successful implementation of the strategic planning framework set out in the NSS at the regional, county and local level, the WDC's submission to this review draws on many of the issues raised in our recent input to the NSS refresh.

The WDC's views on balanced regional development, what it should be trying to achieve and how it might be effectively delivered, were set out in a paper to the WDC Policy Conference *Delivering Balanced Regional Development: A Challenge for Policy* in May 2008. The WDC believes that the regional development issues examined in that paper are relevant to this review and now even more urgent in light of the downturn in the economy.²

The WDC is represented on Sligo, Leitrim and Donegal County Development Boards (CDBs) within the Border Region.

¹ Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs

² This paper can be downloaded at www.wdc.ie/DeliveringBalancedRegionalDevelopmentConference_000.htm

In this submission, the WDC will focus on the areas relevant to the review of the RPGs in which the WDC has direct experience and will also focus on the western area of the Border Region. Therefore we have not addressed all of the headings outlined in the Issues Paper.

2. Vision and Strategic Goals for the Border Region

The vision for the Border Region set out in the current RPGs is:

‘By 2020 the Border Region will be a competitive area recognised as, and prospering from, its unique interface between two economies, where economic success will benefit all, through the building of distinct sub-regional identities, in an outstanding natural environment, with innovative people, which in themselves, will be our most valuable asset.’

The WDC believes that this vision is still appropriate for the Border Region. However it may benefit from the addition of a quality of life element which states that the Border Region will provide a high quality of life for its residents, in addition to the economic and environmental elements of the vision.

The strategic goals for the Border Region set out in the current RPGs, and the WDC’s views on each, are set out below:

- *concentration of critical mass and the promotion and development of the three new Regional Gateways of Dundalk, Sligo and Letterkenny, as a priority for investment, and as key employment locations, with appropriate first class infrastructure and with an indigenous, educated and skilled labour force;*

The WDC agrees with this strategic goal, however would suggest the removal of the term ‘indigenous’ with reference to the labour force.

- *further enhancing the urban structure in the Region by building on the strengths of the Hubs of Cavan and Monaghan, the Primary Development Centre of Drogheda, the Regionally Strategic Town of Carrick on Shannon, and other Key Towns and Villages;*

The WDC agrees with this strategic goal.

- *building on distinct sub regional identities and promoting strategic links with Northern Ireland;*

The WDC would suggest that promoting strategic links with the neighbouring regions of the West, Midlands and Mid-East should also be incorporated into this strategic goal in addition to Northern Ireland. For example Carrick-on-Shannon’s role as a regionally strategic town would extend into north county Roscommon in the West Region.

- *sustaining rural areas and rural communities;*

The WDC believes that the future role of rural areas should not be presented only as ‘sustaining’ the current situation, rather rural areas should be seen as playing a key role in the future economic and social growth and development of the region. This strategic goal could be amended to present a more active and dynamic goal for rural areas and the rural economy.

- *sustaining the uniqueness of the Gaeltacht;*

The WDC agrees with this strategic goal.

- *supporting the international marketing of the Region through distinct images of particular locations, with an emphasis on the quality of the natural environment and its benefits;*

This strategic goal, which focuses on the tourism aspect of international marketing, could be expanded to incorporate enterprise focused marketing which would market the attributes of the region as a location for enterprise. The WDC’s LookWest.ie (www.lookwest.ie) campaign is an example of a marketing initiative which positions the Western Region as an attractive location for enterprise and skilled employees. The NorthWestNow campaign is another example of an enterprise focused marketing campaign for the Border Region.

- *targeting and coordinating key transport and communication links; and by the*

The WDC believes this strategic goal should also include energy links given the importance of north-south energy interconnection.

- *provision of a high quality built and physical environment, with essential infrastructure including housing, transport, water services, schools, healthcare, retail, community and recreational facilities*

The WDC agrees with this strategic goal.

3. Economic Growth and Development

3.1 Enterprise and Employment Issues

Clearly many of the enterprise and employment issues in 2009 are different from those in 2004 when the RPGs were prepared. For example the unemployment rate in the Border Region in 2004 was 5.2% compared with 8.7% in 2008.³ The number of people on the live register continues to increase (there was an 85% increase in the number of people on the live register in the Border Region between March 2008 and 2009 to bring the total to 52,876⁴) and it is likely that the unemployment rate will rise further over the course of 2009. At the end of 2008 the rate in the Border Region was higher than the national average (8.7% v 7.7%). The RPGs will therefore need to incorporate job creation and training and support for the unemployed to a greater extent than currently.

³ CSO, Quarterly National Household Survey 2004 and 2008

⁴ CSO, Live Register March 2009

The WDC prepared a briefing paper *Employment and Unemployment in the Western Region 2000-2008*⁵ in late 2008 which may be of benefit during the review of the Border's RPGs. In the WDC's view, the key enterprise and employment issues for the Border Region which need to be taken into account in the RPGs are:

- *Decline of the construction sector*: In 2006 13% of all employment in the Border Region was in construction (national rate was 11%). This greater reliance on construction employment, particularly in the more rural areas of the region, makes it vulnerable in the current decline. This decline has reduced off-farm employment opportunities for farmers and also created a large cohort of unemployed young men with low educational qualifications.
- *Reliance on locally traded services*: The locally traded services sector⁶ accounted for about a third of all employment in the Border in 2006. As such it is the largest employment sector and is particularly important for small and medium-sized towns with limited manufacturing and international services activity. As this sector depends on local demand it is reliant on the level of activity, purchases and wages in other sectors of the economy e.g. construction, export businesses, the public sector. Growth in inward investment and public sector employment can also underpin demand for locally traded services and lessen the impact of industrial closures.⁷ The economic development elements of the RPGs must recognise the interconnections within the Border's regional economy between enterprises which export and those which trade locally.
- *Skills profile of the labour force*: In 2006 23% of the people aged over 15 years, whose full-time education has ceased, in the Border Region had a third level qualification, considerably lower than the national average of 29%.⁸ Counties in the Border also have a low level of graduate retention with just 13% of 2006 graduates who were originally from Leitrim obtaining their first employment in their home county.⁹ The educational attainment level of the workforce has improved significantly over the course of the decade; however the improvement for younger women has far exceeded that for younger men.¹⁰ The buoyancy of the construction sector which offered well-paid jobs to young men is likely to have played a role in this. Thus, while the current skills profile of the workforce is better than a decade ago, there is still a considerable skills challenge, particularly for young men. If the Border Region is to become a competitive, innovative regional economy with a central role in Ireland's 'smart economy' then this challenge must be central to the Border's RPGs. There will also be a need for the provision of up-skilling and retraining for older workers becoming unemployed from traditional manufacturing and construction.
- *Return of the brain drain*: Over the past 15 years the Border Region has experienced significant growth in its human resource base due to increases in the economically active

⁵ This briefing paper can be downloaded at www.wdc.ie/publications_reports.html

⁶ This includes wholesale, retail, hotels, restaurants, transport, storage, communication, banking, financial services and real estate.

⁷ For instance, the WDC regards relocation of public sector jobs as, in effect, a form of inward investment in the services sector, with the stable jobs involved providing longer term security than is the case with some other forms of inward investment. An exploratory study of public sector relocations to the region showed that on average for every five jobs relocated, an additional job is created in the local economy. WDC (2008), *Moving West: An exploratory study of the social and economic effects of the relocation of public sector offices to towns in the Western Region*

⁸ CSO, *Census of Population 2006*, Vol 10

⁹ HEA (2008), *What Do Graduates Do? The class of 2006*

¹⁰ CSO, *Quarterly National Household Survey Educational Attainment Q2 2002 – Q2 2008*

population, improved education levels and inward migration. Human capital has been central to the region's economic growth, and will be one of the main factors in economic recovery. The possible return of the brain drain which depleted the region's human capital base during previous recessions is one of the most critical economic growth and development issues facing the region. Facilitating the region's workforce to remain in the Border area should be a key goal of the RPGs.

3.2 Location of Economic Activity

The WDC believes that the strategies of the state development agencies for the Border Region need to be aligned to ensure a coherent approach to economic development across the region. The gateways, hubs and other development centres identified in the RPGs should be a priority for the development agencies in terms of industrial and commercial development. Appropriate investment strategies are required to ensure that they can grow to fulfil their respective roles. This is particularly critical for the Border Region as all of its gateways are among the newer, smaller gateways introduced in the NSS. The NDP 2007-2013 noted that

*'A key objective is to build on current trends and maintain strong and sustainable growth in each of the Gateways over the period of the Plan with **particular emphasis on those with lower populations.**'*¹¹ (p. 63)

The RPGs have a central role in setting out the economic strategies for the respective development centres, but more fundamental is the need to ensure that the spending Departments adopt a spatial perspective in their sectoral expenditure decisions. In this regard, the postponement of the Gateway Innovation Fund is regrettable as it represented an important step in recognising a commitment to the objectives of the NSS and balanced regional development.

In addition to the main development centres, the WDC believes that the Border's RPGs must also address the economic development issues faced by smaller centres and rural towns. Significant industrial activity and employment is taking place in these areas and the retention of this activity must also be a focus of the Border RPGs and future industrial strategies.

Research on travel to work patterns commissioned by the WDC shows that areas in the Border Region, outside of the main centres, are very important places of employment. For instance, 30% of those living in the Sligo town labour catchment, actually work in rural areas (places with less than 1,000 persons), predominately in counties Sligo and Leitrim. In the case of Letterkenny, over 34% of people living in its labour catchment work in rural areas, while over 62% of people living in the Carrick-on-Shannon labour catchment work outside the town and in rural areas.¹² It would be regrettable if too great a focus on the attraction of new industry to the larger centres was at the expense of existing employers in those and other areas. The Border's RPGs should incorporate recognition of the important industrial and commercial role of centres not designated a gateway or hub.

¹¹ Emphasis added.

¹² Meredith and Foley (2008), Local and Regional Labour Markets in the Western Region: Spatial Analysis of Daily Mobility Patterns, 2006 for WDC

These data highlight the significance of employment centres in rural locations. Further analysis shows that this employment is not just based on agriculture and the RPGs should recognise the dispersed nature of employment. It will be important that supports for the recently unemployed to access re-training and re-skilling should also be made available in smaller centres.

3.3 Indigenous Enterprise Sector

The NSS and the current Border RPGs recognise the key role of indigenous enterprise. In 2007 70% of all state supported employment in the Border Region was in Irish-owned companies, the highest share of any region. Over the five year period 2003-2007, while there was a net loss of 1,392 jobs in state supported foreign-owned companies in the Border, there was a net increase of jobs in Irish-owned companies of 2,721.¹³ The Border needs to position itself to encourage indigenous enterprises. This can be achieved through supporting innovation (in both high-tech and traditional enterprises) and encouraging business start-ups¹⁴ to enable the region to contribute to the ‘smart economy’.

WDC research has shown that indigenous firms will set up in the Border Region, including in small and medium-sized towns, largely because of the residential location or preference of the entrepreneur (provided the facilities at specific sites meet their needs).¹⁵ A growing number of Irish-owned high-tech firms that produce and utilise sophisticated ICT and employ highly skilled and creative workers are located in the Border Region. Indeed, some firms in more traditional manufacturing sectors are also becoming more innovative, globally competitive and growing their export markets.¹⁶ It is important that the Border RPGs recognise the contribution of Irish-owned manufacturing firms to local economies and that enterprise support policies are directed to sustaining those that are competitive and can maintain employment.

Sectors based on natural resources such as renewable energy, food production, rural tourism, the creative sector and marine present particular opportunities for the region and need to be prioritised. For example Sligo and Leitrim have the highest shares of their workforce engaged in the creative sector of all the counties in the Western Region,¹⁷ while the western seaboard has the best wind and wave energy potential in the country with Donegal a leader in renewable energy.¹⁸ Creative and innovative strategies that maximise the employment and growth potential of these sectors should be put in place and the RPGs should highlight their potential.

4. Infrastructure

4.1 Roads

The road infrastructure of the Border Region is fundamental to both its economic and social development. The vast majority of internal transport in Ireland, both private and business, is

¹³ Forfás Annual Employment Survey 2007

¹⁴ The WDC Investment Fund has supported 50 start-ups, the majority outside gateways. Data from the Revenue Commissioners show that the growth of small businesses in the seven western counties 2003-2007 has exceeded the state average.

¹⁵ WDC (2007), Rural Businesses at Work: Case studies of rural enterprises in the Western Region

¹⁶ e.g. Mantis Cranes, Co Donegal

¹⁷ The WDC has undertaken research on the creative sector in the Western Region and its potential for growth. WDC (2009), Creative West: The Creative Sector in the Western Region

¹⁸ WDC (2004), To Catch the Wind; WDC (2008), Wood Energy and Local Authorities: Donegal Case Study

conducted via the road network. Road transport is even more important in more rural regions where there is relatively limited access to public transport. For example 78% of those living in the Border Region travelled to work in a car or van compared with 70% nationally in 2006.¹⁹ There is considerable scope to enhance public transport options in the Border Region, in particular bus transport which clearly depends upon a high quality road network.

While completion of the M1 Major Inter Urban (MIU) route to the Border has been a major benefit to the east of the region, it has made the deficiencies in the road network in the centre and western part of the Border region even more apparent. At present this area has no motorways and very few roads of dual-carriageway standard, particularly in the western counties. The current constraints on the public finances have led to a postponement of several road projects in the Border Region. It is vital that the Border RPGs outline the importance of road connections within the region which interlink the main development centres with each other and smaller centres, as well as connections to adjoining regions. Enhanced access to Dublin from the eastern part of the region is not sufficient to stimulate regional development across the Border.

The WDC considers the main road infrastructure priorities for the Border Region, which should be incorporated in the RPGs and completed by 2015, to be:

- Completion of the Atlantic Road Corridor to at least dual-carriageway standard, including the N15 linking the gateways of Letterkenny and Sligo which incorporates the Ballybofey-Stranorlar bypass and the Sligo to the county boundary projects. Also the N17 linking Sligo southwards with Galway including the Collooney-Charlestown project.
- At least dual-carriageway standard for the N4 to the gateway of Sligo including the Carrick on Shannon bypass, Cloonmahon-Castlebaldwin and Longford-Drumsna projects.
- At least dual-carriageway standard for the N2/N14 to the gateway of Letterkenny (via the A5 through Northern Ireland) including the Ardee bypass, Slane bypass and N13 Junction-Lifford projects.
- Upgrading of the important strategic route of the N16 linking Sligo with Enniskillen including the Manorhamilton bypass and Manorhamilton-Glenfarne projects.
- Improvement of the coastal routes of the N56 in Donegal which includes linking the port of Killybegs and the N59 coastal route linking Sligo with Ballina (and on to Westport).

Enhancing road connections to international access points is necessary if the full benefits of international air access to the Border Region are to be realised. Ireland West Airport Knock is linked with the Border Region via the N17 and N15. Improvements to these routes will enhance the benefits for the Border from extending the airport's catchment area. Improved road access to Derry will also enhance the accessibility of City of Derry Airport for business and residents in the Border Region.

4.2 Public Transport

The current railway network of the Border Region consists of radial services to Sligo town serving stations in counties Sligo and Leitrim including Carrick-on-Shannon. Passenger numbers

¹⁹ CSO, Census of Population 2006. These figures relate to those who drive and also those who travel as passengers.

have increased on each of these services in part due to greater frequency of services, better timetabling and improved rolling stock.

The Government has committed to a phased re-opening of the Western Rail Corridor (WRC), the line from the NSS gateway of Sligo to the gateways of Galway and Limerick with onward connections to Cork and Waterford. Services from Galway to Limerick are due to commence in August 2009. This will substantially improve the public transport links between the second, third and fourth largest gateways and will encourage much greater interaction between them enabling an improved regional balance in economic activity. The next phases of the WRC will connect Galway to Tuam (2011) and Claremorris (2014). The only commitment to the section from Claremorris to Collooney is for its preservation.

The WDC believes that the greatest benefit of this transport corridor will only be realised when it is complete. The WDC also believes that quality services, good timetabling and good rolling stock are required to ensure the success of services on the first sections of the line. This will also help make the case for the extension of services to Sligo. Sufficient Park and Ride facilities and much better integration with other transport modes are also required and the RPGs should reflect this. Furthermore the WRC adds considerably to the sustainable transport modes available in the region and provides many new options for rail freight transport.

The Border RPGs should include a statement on the importance of maximising passenger take-up of existing services which will promote further investment in services and further improve the attractiveness of rail as a sustainable public transport mode.

4.3 Airports

International air access is vital to connecting the Border Region to the UK, Europe and the rest of the world. The WDC believes that quality services to and from the region's closest international airports at Ireland West Airport Knock to the south, and City of Derry airport to the north, are fundamental to connecting the region globally. The RPGs should contain a commitment to ensuring that these airports are enabled to continue to support the enterprise and tourism needs of the region connecting suppliers and customers to international markets.

Improving land journey times and access to and from the airports, thereby extending the airports' catchments, will also be important in supporting the airports' development. Improvements to the surface transport links to these airports are required, in particular the N15, N17 and N5.

4.4 Energy Provision

Quality energy infrastructure and supply are essential to underpin the economic development of the Border Region. Appropriate investments in energy infrastructure will allow the region to compete in attracting industry, maintaining existing enterprises and developing the renewable energy sector.

Quality and reliable electricity supply is critical for productive economic activity, as well as for the quality of life of those living in the region. Investment in electricity infrastructure is key to meeting the future needs of the region and also to enabling the Border to capitalise on the important natural energy assets in the region. The Border Region has some of the best conditions

in the world for the generation of electricity from wind and wave energy, particularly in Donegal, Sligo and Leitrim. Developing the electricity grid will further enable the electricity produced in the region to be exported to other parts of the country, and beyond in future. The RPGs should clearly facilitate the development of such important strategic infrastructure and ensure that local planning guidelines reflect this.

The Border Region has a significant proportion of the national forestry asset (14.5%).²⁰ This is also an important renewable energy resource which can be used for producing heat. The WDC has recently launched a strategy for the development of wood heat in the Western Region. It was found that the growth of the wood energy sector in the Western Region, as proposed under the regional strategy, would result in the following impacts:

- Generate 477MW of heat energy by 2020 utilising 472,000 tonnes of timber with an annual value of €1.7 million to the farming sector
- Increase annual Gross Value Added (GVA) in the Western Region of €15 million by 2020
- Create 887 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) jobs by 2020
- Generate CO₂ savings of 619,000 tonnes per annum by 2020 (This would be a benefit of €6.9m in 2020 if carbon is valued at €15 per tonne).

A significant proportion of these benefits will occur in the Border Region. Therefore the RPGs should seek to facilitate the development of wood heat and provide clear direction for the planning and development of this sector.

The WDC also believes that further development of the natural gas grid will bring a range of benefits to the region and help to make its industries more competitive. The WDC believes that the extension of the gas transmission grid to Letterkenny and Sligo would make an important contribution to the development of the western part of the Border Region.

4.5 Telecommunications

Availability of high quality affordable broadband infrastructure is essential to the economic and social development of the Border. While significant advances have been made in rollout nationally and to larger regional centres, using fixed, wireless and mobile technologies, and larger towns are relatively well-served, progress in rural areas has been limited. Even when broadband is available, services are often patchy, unstable, and with limited capacity. As Next Generation Networks (NGNs) requiring ever higher bandwidths come on stream, there is a real danger that broadband capacity in areas outside of large centres will be insufficient to support NGNs and that the spatial digital divide will widen.

The WDC believes it is important that local and regional authorities take the lead in facilitating the rollout of high quality affordable broadband infrastructure in their planning regulations, and through support for the development of fibre-based open access networks, including providing ducts as part of infrastructure development programmes. A facilitative approach to road openings and infrastructure sharing should be adopted.

²⁰ Forest Service (2007), National Forest Inventory, Republic of Ireland

5. Rural Development

The regional development focus of the NDP is on the gateways, with the assumption that achievement of critical mass in the gateways will drive development of their ‘gateway regions’. In reality the interactions between gateways and their regions are complex and not very well understood, even more so in the Border Region which is home to three gateways, and three distinct sub-regions. Research commissioned by the WDC on travel to work patterns from Census 2006 has provided useful information to the WDC on the reality and complexity of workers’ commuting patterns and the extent of interaction between the western Border area’s gateways, other towns and rural areas.²¹

The Border Region outside of the gateways and hubs is predominately rural – characterised by medium-sized and small market towns, villages and open countryside. The recent buoyancy in the economy, particularly in construction, has generally enabled rural economies to absorb the decline in the primary sectors of agriculture and fisheries, and some elements of industry. As employment opportunities expanded, many rural areas gained population. However, employment in rural areas is under pressure with the downturn in construction activity and pressure on the local services sector (see above). The challenges faced by rural areas, and rural towns, must be incorporated within the RPGs.

The NSS suggests that many of the strengths of smaller towns and villages lie in their capacity to accommodate employment, residential and other functions on the basis of their lower costs and quality of life. However, the functions of rural areas and small and medium-sized provincial towns, and their contribution to the achievement of the NSS and RPG objectives, have not been very clearly defined. Rural towns act as the focal point for employment, trade and services for their rural hinterlands. The origins and current profile of such towns are diverse e.g. seaside ports and resorts, market and administrative centres, dormitories for larger urban centres. Many of their traditional functions are changing with consequent employment and service impacts.

The Border’s RPGs should facilitate rural towns to adapt to changes in the rural economy. In order to do that a process to assess a town’s particular assets, and its economic, social and environmental strengths and weaknesses should be developed (this could be based on a process similar to the ‘Healthcheck’ used in England). This could lead to an Action Plan for each town linked into the County Development Plans, RPGs and the NSS. The advantage of this approach is that, although the same process would apply to all towns, the strength of each town is individually assessed and developed.

Rural areas are often seen as residential locations from where workers commute to larger urban centres. The WDC believes that the Border’s RPGs should not envisage rural regions solely as sites for consumption, or as sources of labour for regional centres thereby giving rise to extensive commuting. This strategy would run directly counter to the trend of rural population growth in recent years, where most rural dwellers have been able to work relatively close to where they live. Rather, the Border’s RPGs should facilitate small and medium-sized provincial towns and their rural hinterlands to develop at their own scale. They can continue to be active and dynamic

²¹ Meredith and Foley (2008), Local and Regional Labour Markets in the Western Region: Spatial Analysis of Daily Mobility Patterns, 2006 for WDC

parts of the productive economy, beyond the agriculture, tourism and natural resource sectors which are often assumed to be the dominant sectors of the rural economy.

The findings from the WDC's LookWest.ie campaign, as well as the WDC's exploratory study on the relocation of public offices to rural towns,²² illustrate that people want to live and work in rural areas. The motivations for this vary between individuals, but quality of life emerges as the primary motivating factor. A situation where people want to, and do, live in rural areas, but job creation strategies concentrate on gateways and hubs only, creates a situation of unsustainable and undesirable commuting patterns.

6. Tourism

The NSS identified tourism as a sector which had considerable potential to contribute to the development of the Border Region. The region has considerable natural and manmade assets which make it an attractive tourist destination including highly scenic coastlines and lakelands, a strong and unique cultural legacy including the Yeats connection in Sligo, the Ulster Canal and Marble Arch Geopark.

The North West Region experienced a 29% increase in the number of overseas visitors and a 14% increase in overseas tourist revenue between 2002 and 2007. These figures were influenced by a particularly strong performance in 2007 likely linked to specific events in the region in that year. Some 64% of 2007 overseas visitors were holidaymakers, a lower share than for either the West or Shannon Regions; 26% of overseas visitors were visiting friends or relatives, far higher than in the other regions. This pattern points to relative weaknesses in the holiday tourist market in the region and indeed the North West only accounted for 4% of total national overseas tourism revenue in 2007. Domestic tourism is particularly important for the North West with 49% of total tourist visits to the region in 2007 being made by domestic tourists.²³

While the region has experienced some tourism growth over the past few years, this is not evenly distributed across the region. There is potential for rural tourism to develop and contribute more to the rural economy of the Border Region. The Border RPGs should incorporate a commitment to rural tourism and the wider dispersion of tourism development across the region. The WDC has been involved in this area since publishing research and an action plan in 2001 intended to stimulate the rural tourism product in the Western Region.²⁴ As a result the multi-agency Western Development Tourism Programme (WDTP) was established to oversee the implementation of the action plan through a pilot programme of innovative rural tourism projects.²⁵ Some of the projects initiated by the WDTP include Walking in the West (a guide for the development of long walking trails), the Tourism Tastes Trails and the Green Box (Ireland's first integrated ecotourism destination located in the Border Region). These are examples of innovative tourism products based in rural areas and servicing niche markets. The WDC believes such an approach should be included in the RPGs.

²² WDC (2008), Moving West: An exploratory study of the social and economic effects of the relocation of public sector offices to towns in the Western Region

²³ Fáilte Ireland, North West Region Fact Sheet 2007

²⁴ WDC (2001), Blueprint for Tourism Development in the West: An Action Plan for Rural Areas

²⁵ A case study of the approach taken in the WDTP and its activities is contained in WDC (2006), The WDC's Model of Rural Development

7. Conclusion

This review of the Regional Planning Guidelines for the Border Region presents a significant opportunity to address the challenges facing the Border in a more difficult economic situation. The WDC hopes that this submission will be of benefit to this process and would welcome an opportunity to meet with the Border Regional Authority to discuss this submission.

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April 2009**

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